THE BLOGS

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Ardeshir Zahedi: legend and lesson

Front door of the shuttered Iranian embassy in Washington, DC. Image: U.S. Department of State.

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Pahlavi Iran's last ambassador to the United States, Ardeshir Zahedi, who died on Thursday at the age of 93, was nothing short of legendary. He was arguably the most flamboyant foreign ambassador in the history of Washington, an icon of 1970s excess. There isn't a superlative that wasn't used to describe him: charming, elegant, extravagant, glamorous, handsome, suave, courtly, energetic, generous, devil-may-care.

All of this celebrity served a clear purpose. Zahedi persuaded Americans that the richer Iran became, the more stable it became, and that selling it arms on a massive scale would spread that stability. He so charmed and mesmerized America that it failed to see the weaknesses of his master, Mohammed Reza Shah. Zahedi even created space for the Shah to beat the revolution—had the Shah wished to do so.

Zahedi's life is more than a juicy story. It demonstrates the vulnerability of American policy to foreign manipulation. The United States is often accused of interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. As Zahedi's case shows, it works both ways.

An unlikely diplomat

Zahedi was born around 1928 in Tehran. His father had been a general, Fazlollah Zahedi, who hailed from a wealthy landowning family. Zahedi the father had been close to the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, and a faithful servant of his son and heir, Mohammad Reza Shah. He was a complete insider.

In 1946, when Ardeshir was about 18, his father sent him to America to study. He enrolled at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, where he graduated in agriculture in 1950. It was a popular destination for Iranian students of agriculture and engineering, and far from politics. In summers, he would travel around America, one time as far as Alaska, working menial jobs. Zahedi knew America up close, which later would serve him well.

It was in Utah that he first met the Shah, who passed through on a visit. On Zahedi's return to Iran, he reinforced his tie to his monarch. In 1953, a popular movement forced the Shah into exile. It was General Zahedi who carried out the coup to restore him, becoming prime minister; his son, Ardeshir, also played a key role on the ground.

This made young Ardeshir a favorite of the Shah, and effectively a member of the royal court. Zahedi belonged to one of the so-called "thousand families," Iran's traditional oligarchy, with a seat near the throne and direct access to the monarch. For a time he was even married to the Shah's daughter.

The Shah sent Zahedi to Washington as ambassador when he was only 32. He had no diplomatic experience, but he had the Shah's daughter, and the Shah's confidence. When he protested to the Shah that he had no understanding of diplomacy or the foreign ministry, the Shah reassured him: "I am personally in charge of foreign policy.… And since you have studied in America, you know America and the Americans quite well."

Learning the ropes

Iran's problem in America was simple: the Shah's regime looked increasingly out of step with American values. In the 1950s, the United States had no problem backing despots. But by the 1960s, the world had moved on. Some in

America began to worry that monarchs and dictators supported by America were a liability. The Soviets could exploit spreading discontent, and the only way to stop that was to promote American-style democracy.

Zahedi arrived in the spring of 1960. *Time Magazine* put the Shah on its cover in September 1960, under the headline "Struggle for Stability." It warned of a "new discontent, among the country's swelling city masses," and concluded: "Iran can no longer be governed by the simple kingly fiat: 'I have given orders. Let them be carried out.'"

But instead of making the counter-case, Zahedi got sidetracked in a war against dissident Iranian students in the United States. Then he got into a scrape with Robert Kennedy, attorney-general, over an audience the president's brother gave to some dissident students. It led Robert Kennedy to cancel a stopover in Iran that he had planned during an Asian visit.

From that point, Zahedi was more a liability than an asset at the Kennedy White House. The Shah pulled him, sending him off to London instead. Zahedi had learned a lesson he would apply later: in Washington, a foreign ambassador doesn't tangle with the president's people. And an ambassador doesn't tangle with student dissidents. Better to ignore them, and let the secret police handle them.

Zahedi went on from the London ambassadorship to become foreign minister. He did much to improve Iran's relations with Arab countries, by retracting a long-standing Iranian claim to Bahrain. Then, in early 1973, the Shah sent him back to Washington as ambassador. Within months, the world had turned upside-down.

Celebrity diplomat

The October 1973 Arab-Israeli war led to an Arab oil embargo, and sent the price of crude oil skyrocketing. The “Great Oil Shock,” as it would be called, saw the price of oil quadruple. While the industrialized world reeled, Iran’s coffers overflowed. The Shah already had delusions of grandeur; now he imagined he could turn Iran into a regional superpower.

Zahedi’s mission had become even clearer. America was hurting, and much of the hurt came from the recession that lasted from 1973 to 1975. Popular anger was directed against price-gouging Arabs, and most Americans didn’t distinguish between Arabs and Iranians. And while the Shah didn’t join the boycott, he band-wagoned in pushing price hikes. How could Iran stay aligned with the United States? By appearing friendly and stable. Enter Zahedi.

His return to Washington was well-timed, because Zahedi already had a friend at the very top: Richard Nixon. Nixon had been vice president in the 1950s, when the CIA had helped restore the Shah. Zahedi had met him back then; after Nixon's defeat in 1960, Zahedi hadn't turned away, but kept Nixon close. That paid off from 1969, and Zahedi could count on a warm welcome from the Republican establishment when he arrived in 1973.

But Zahedi wouldn't rely only on a few well-placed friends in the foreign policy firmament. He knew that in America, foreign policy depended on domestic support. Iran had no natural domestic constituency in America, so he would have to build one. It would have to include leaders in journalism, entertainment, business, and education. The astonishing thing about Zahedi's second ambassadorship is just how easy it was to line them up.

He did it by a hugely successful campaign of branding. Zahedi was astute enough to grasp something fundamental about Washington. The 1960s had liberated the city. The Kennedys had brought glitz and glamor to Washington, and helped to meld the world of politics and entertainment. The opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1971 finally gave Washington a first-class venue, and the stars began to appear. Zahedi set out to break the Embassy Row mold of the discreet ambassador and the buttoned-down diplomatic reception. He would turn Iran into a splashy luxury brand, by turning himself into a celebrity.

Zahedi, when he returned, was no longer an amateur. He oozed charm, described well by another Iranian (the historian Abbas Milani):

> *I once saw him work a room. His performance was a work of art, with an infinite variety of nuanced gestures, nods, smiles, embraces.... To some ladies, he offered a nod; others got a handshake; a few received a*

perfunctory, but discernible, bow toward their slightly raised hands; still fewer had their fingertips kissed. ”

As this suggested, he cultivated the image of a ladies' man. He had returned to Washington a bachelor, having parted with the Shah's daughter. (That amicable divorce had no impact on his relations with the Shah.) Pearl Bailey, the actress and singer, who was a regular performer at the embassy, wrote in her memoirs:

> *“Ardeshir and his entourage would sweep into places and heads would turn at the entrance of this imposing figure. The ladies all vied for his attention; they did not hide their intentions. Zahedi was Washington; the Iranian embassy was the place to be. ”*

It was *the* place because Zahedi turned the embassy into a non-stop party venue, no expense spared. In the recollection of television news celebrity Barbara Walters,

> *“Zahedi believed in large parties with hundreds of guests, flowing champagne, mounds of fresh Iranian caviar, and a bulging buffet with every kind of treat from hummus to hamburgers. You could eat your fill, mingle and mix, or just stand around and watch. There was plenty to watch. There were belly dancers to clap to, musicians to listen to, bands to dance to, politicians to talk to, and movie stars to ogle. ”*

Zahedi wanted to stand out, and his invitations went beyond the normal run of Cabinet secretaries, senators, congressmen, and Supreme Court justices. He imported celebrities: Liza Minelli, Gregory Peck, Andy Warhol, and most famously, Liz Taylor, with whom he reputedly had a fling. (Henry Kissinger was the matchmaker; Zahedi would later describe the relationship as

"platonic." According to Taylor's biographers, she was keen, but Zahedi dropped her.)

Then there was the embassy itself. It was constructed in a modernist style in the 1950s, on a prime location on Massachusetts Avenue. Zahedi's contribution was to bring in a high-end interior designer from London, to add glitz to a restrained building. He installed a mix of European furniture and massive Iranian carpets. But the centerpiece was the Persian Room, under an enormous domed ceiling. This was encrusted "with a kaleidoscope of mirrored mosaics, glittering medallions and tendrils cascading thirty feet down the walls." Attendees of soirees reported that it was amazing at night when lit by candles, their reflections repeated thousands of times.

The social columns regaled the uninvited with tales of Zahedi's parties, dwelling on the caviar and the champagne, the Hollywood stars and the dancing on table tops. The numbers also tell the story. In 1977, for example, the embassy hosted 7,000 guests for social events. This including 2,000 in October 1977 to celebrate the Shah's birthday. (That party caused a two-hour delay for Washington commuters, and the city police chief had to issue a statement the next day.)

The diplomacy of distraction

People magazine called him "the Sun King of the capital social whirl." But the point of it all was serious: to anesthetize Washington, to distract from the glaring defects of the Shah's regime.

Just why was Iran, supposedly our friend, working in tandem with the Arabs to jack up oil prices? Just why was Iran, our friend, being cited in Amnesty International reports for systematically detaining and torturing thousands of

political prisoners? Just why was Iran, our friend, running agents of its secret police, the SAVAK, in the United States? And why was Iran, our ally, buying up every piece of military hardware it could put its hands on?

It was this last aspect that gave rise to a large question. Between 1972 and 1977, Iranian purchases of U.S. arms increased more than sevenfold, and Iran became the largest single purchaser of U.S. military equipment. In 1975, Iran imported more weapons than Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, combined. Some strategists became alarmed: what was all this weaponry *for*? As one wrote, "in Iran's case, arms transfers can cause more instability than they are designed to prevent." Could an incautious Iran even drag America into a war?

One might think that the journalists, at least, would ask some very hard questions, and a few did. But Zahedi succeeded in anesthetizing much of the media too. He did it in two ways. First, journalists figured high on his invite and gift list—not just invitations to dinner, but to Iran junkets. Barbara Walters was at the top of all these lists; he once even sent her a Cartier watch (which she returned).

But he understood something else: there were journalists and there were journalists. A 1975 *Washingtonian* article declared the rise of the "mediacracy," a new aristocracy based upon media visibility. These weren't your run-of-the-mill correspondents; they were themselves creations of television. And they needed high-level access for on-camera interviews. Who topped the list of desirable interviewees? The Shah of Iran. America remained fascinated by monarchy and wealth, and the Shah combined both.

Zahedi became the access man for American journalists who wanted to interview the Shah. Zahedi didn't give many interviews of his own; the Shah

didn't trust anyone but himself to represent Iran's views in the prestige American media. So Zahedi decided whom he would see, and on which terms. Naturally, the would-be interviewers did everything to remain in Zahedi's good graces.

The results were sometimes unsatisfactory, and Zahedi could find himself ordered to block transmission of an interview already given. This happened, for example, in 1974, when Mike Wallace interviewed the Shah for "60 Minutes." Zahedi was told that Wallace's questions were "impertinent, unfriendly, and provocative." "We would prefer this interview not be televised," Zahedi was instructed. Even Zahedi couldn't meet this request. But most interviewers showed the Shah more deference.

Did the trading in access and excess work even on skeptical journalists? Some resisted it. The syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft reportedly urged the Shah to recall Zahedi after the election of Jimmy Carter. Zahedi was too "Republican," and he had turned the Iranian embassy into a Playboy club. But other journalists saw the point of Zahedi's charm offensive. Philip Geyelin, a *Washington Post* columnist, put it this way: "If you come away with a nice feeling, the next time you hear the Shah attacked, you say, 'Well, they're nice people.'" Sally Quinn, also of the *Washington Post,* said: "People felt good about the ambassador, so they had a positive image of the country."

Toppled by revolution

As late as March 1978, as Iran's regime tottered, the gossipy *Washington Dossier* ran a cover featuring Zahedi and Beverly Sills, the soprano. The occasion was a party he hosted for her, prior to her opening in a Washington run of *The Merry Widow.* It was business as usual for Zahedi, even thought the streets of Iran were beginning to seethe.

But nothing better exemplified the extent of Zahedi's achievement. Right up to the revolution, America was in the fog about Iran. If the Shah had been willing and able to do so, he probably could have used force to keep his throne. Key figures in the administration and the media would have looked the other way. Zahedi's campaign had built up a bank of good will that could have been used by the Shah in the crisis.

Indeed, as the revolution gained steamed, Jimmy Carter, prompted by his national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, called Zahedi to the White House and urged him to go back to Iran and buck up the Shah. Who but Zahedi could best convey the message that the United States would back him?

That's a long story, but when Zahedi arrived in Tehran, he discovered the well-kept secret that the Shah was battling cancer, and wasn't up to the fight. Zahedi did all he could to persuade the Shah not to leave the country. To no avail. As Zahedi put it later: "Defeat is always bitter, but losing without a fight is the bitterest kind of defeat."

The revolution led to Zahedi's downfall. He fled his embassy; staff sympathetic to the revolution emptied the champagne bottles. Zahedi pulled all his strings to find refuge for the Shah, whom he accompanied around the globe. Such shelter as the Shah found, he owed to Zahedi's machinations. Zahedi now suffered all the indignities of having been the Shah's "last ambassador." He even had to endure an FBI investigation in 1979, to see whether the gifts he had dispensed constituted bribery.

Zahedi later settled in a villa inherited from his father in Switzerland. Even into his nineties, he continued to write the occasional *Washington Post* op-ed, assuming the posture of an Iranian patriot, who argued that pressure on Iran

was counter-productive. He published a partial memoir in Persian and English, and shipped his papers to the Hoover Institution at Stanford, assuring his place in the work of future historians.

And the embassy? The State Department is in charge of minimal maintenance, but the building shows forty years of neglect, inside and out. It has become a modern ruin, unlikely to be inhabited anytime soon, and not by the likes of Ardeshir Zahedi.

A cautionary tale

Ardeshir Zahedi deserves admiration. He performed a miracle of acculturation, much like a hugely successful new immigrant. The weak learn the ways of the strong, so as to capture some of their strength. Zahedi mastered Washington's ways. No American ambassador in Tehran ever read Iran like Zahedi read America. To Zahedi, America was an open book, whose pages he expertly flipped.

But admiration should be tempered with concern. The vulnerabilities Zahedi exploited back then haven't been plugged, because they can't be. America can be charmed, dazzled, and seduced, because its political system mingles celebrity and money with policy. Washington is full of foreign diplomats and agents who come to their offices every morning looking for ways to divert the foreign policy process of the United States. For them, the Zahedi story isn't just a bit of 1970s nostalgia. It's a playbook.

It's happened more than once, and it could happen again. And as the Iranian instance shows, it could happen when America can least afford it.